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A Hatred “Required by Religion”?  
Spinoza and Cohen on Hatred*  

Abstract: This paper focuses on one criticism of Spinoza’s Tractatus Theologico-Politicus articulated by Hermann Cohen between 1910 and 1918. Spinoza appears to claim that Jews were required by their religion to hate other nations or peoples. But for Cohen, this is a pernicious misrepresentation: the Talmud not only puts the condemnation of hatred on par with the most basic ethical prohibitions, it even bans all hatred as “groundless.” Condemnation of hatred is as fundamental to Judaism as its counterpart, the command to “love ones neighbor.”  

Key words: Love of neighbor, hatred, religious duty, sinat hinam.  

Introduction  

At the end of his essay “Spinoza on State and Religion, Judaism and Christianity,”1 Hermann Cohen repeats his main objections to Spinoza’s Tractatus Theologico-Politicus (TTP)2: the suppression of the concept of the Noahide, a misunderstanding of prophecy and of the history of Judaism, a lack of understanding for the modern question of law and the state, a misguided distinction between Bible criticism and the philosophy of religion …  

There are so many criticisms the reader cannot know which one should be privileged – and what exactly it was that induced the Jewish German author to turn so fiercely, indeed so bitterly, against Spinoza. Cohen writes that he finds the composition of the Tractatus heterogeneous: this might explain, at least partly, why his objections also are diverse. His article was published in 1915, in the midst of World War I, and his complaints must  

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have been exacerbated by the vicissitudes of the times: he himself explicitly says that he could discern traces of “the demonic spirit of Spinoza, still poisoning the atmosphere from within and without. The pithy sayings Spinoza employed to vent his vengeful hatred of the Jews can be found even now, almost verbatim, in the newspapers.” But Cohen does not say to what newspapers he is alluding or specify which “pithy sayings” of Spinoza.

In this paper I focus on an objection that appears, almost as an afterthought, at the end of the 1915 article: how did Spinoza dare write that Jews were required by their religion to hate other nations, or peoples? Cohen added there an exclamation mark (in brackets), which I transformed into a question mark in the title of this paper. Hatred as a religious duty: could this be an appropriate point of departure for deciphering Cohen’s stand on Spinoza? Only one among many, to be sure, but an important one, which is still, sadly enough, very much a live issue today.

The question is not meant to reopen the debate on Spinoza as a “self-hating Jew,” as one often hears it today. Cohen does accuse Spinoza of having been full of hatred because the Jews had excommunicated him. Still, had he made only that accusation, or mainly that one, against Spinoza, nobody would have remembered his article, whereas the article is considered until today, both among opponents and partisans of Spinoza, one of the most salient criticisms of the TTP ever written. One of the reasons that the article is considered so important may be that Cohen had once been counted amongst Spinoza’s admirers – and he remained his admirer, up to his article of 1915 and even in it; he was also an admirer of the TTP on certain issues. He remains cryptic, sometimes, in the reasons for his admiration: for example, when he says at the end of the article that “this great enemy who emerged from our midst is our best witness, against his own will.” But he can also be unequivocally clear: for example, at the beginning of the article, when he evokes the meaning and also the importance (Bedeutung) of the TTP in the history of civilization, and praises it for having been “conducive to universally furthering the Enlightenment, in matters of politics and of religion”; then he insists that the last chapters of Spinoza’s book “constitute the historical-political value

3 Werke, 16.414; Cohen, Spinoza on State, 51.
4 Werke, 16.426; Cohen, Spinoza on State, 59.
5 It will be enough to mention Leo Strauss, whose work as a whole remained marked by Cohen’s fierce discussion of Spinoza’s TTP. See here more particularly Leora Batnitzky, “Hermann Cohen and Leo Strauss,” Journal of Jewish Thought and Philosophy 13 (2004) 187–212.
6 Werke, 16.321.
of the Tractatus,” which became, thanks to those chapters, “a fundamental work of political-religious liberalism.” Cohen, who himself underlines these words, adds that he will not even ask if Spinoza had predecessors in this matter: “We want to leave him his achievement, without belittling it.” This praise ought not to be forgotten, when it comes to evaluating Cohen’s stand on Spinoza.

In this paper I first concentrate on those features of Spinoza’s assertions on hatred that seem to me relevant for understanding Cohen’s reception of Spinoza. I then turn to Cohen’s reception of Spinoza, with special emphasis on his handling of hatred and his use of biblical and talmudic sources dealing with it; his most intriguing innovation being his reading of the talmudic sinat hinam (grundloser Hass, groundless hatred). Can Cohen’s idiosyncratic understanding of that talmudic notion be taken as consistent with Spinoza’s own thinking on hatred?

Ever since the 17th century, Spinoza’s words on love – but also on hatred – have remained one of the most famous hallmarks of his philosophy:

Non ridere, non lugere, neque detestari, sed intelligere: not to deride, bewail, or execrate human actions, but to understand them. So I have regarded human emotions such as love, hatred, anger, envy, pride, pity, and other agitations of the mind not as vices of human nature, but as properties pertaining to it, in the same way as heat, cold, storm, thunder and such pertain to the nature of the atmosphere.

Although Hermann Cohen expressed reservations about this basic line of thought very early in his career, it was only much later that his opposition to Spinoza gathered strength, to become no less than a frenzied outburst. In the second part of this paper, I try to shed some light on his reservations – and then, in a final section, focus on his fury and suggest a plausible explanation for it.

7 Werke, 16.324.
9 Spinoza, Works, 681.
1. Spinoza on hatred

It is in Chapter 17 of the TTP that Spinoza went so far as writing that in the Hebrew state in the time of Moses, and after Moses’ death before the institution of monarchy, hatred had been nothing less than a religious duty:

… believing that their kingdom was God’s kingdom and that they alone were God’s children, while the other nations were God’s enemies for whom they [the Hebrews] therefore felt an implacable hatred (for this, too, they believed to be a mark of piety; see Psalm 139 v. 21, 22), they … could conceive of nothing more wicked and abominable than to betray their country, that is, the very kingdom of the God whom they worshipped. Therefore the patriotism of the Hebrews was not simply patriotism but piety, and this, together with hatred for other nations, was so fostered and nourished by their daily ritual that it inevitably became part of their nature. For their daily worship was not merely quite different, making them altogether unique and completely distinct from other peoples, but also utterly opposed to others. Hence this … was bound to engender a lasting hatred of a most deep rooted kind, since it was a hatred that had its source in strong devotion or piety and was believed to be a religious duty – for that is the bitterest and most persistent of all kinds of hatred.10

Cohen’s indignation at the end of his 1915 article on Spinoza is directed against the assertion that hatred had become a religious duty, and one of the reasons for which he is outraged must be that Spinoza only gave one reference, or source, to justify it: Ps 139: 21–22.11 Could this one source be considered adequate to justify the far-reaching thesis of hatred as a religious duty?

Manuel Joel (1826–1890), one of Cohen’s teachers at the Breslau seminar who is acknowledged, up to this day, as a pioneer in the study of Spinoza’s Hebrew sources, had already been indignant at Spinoza’s use of Psalm 139.12 He also had said that Spinoza ought to have been more explicit about his real source for that passage: the Roman historian Tacitus, who was known for having been the “greatest opponent of the Jews” and whom Spinoza

10 Spinoza, Works, 546 f.
11 Psalm 139:
[19 Surely thou wilt slay the wicked, O God: depart from me therefore, ye bloody men.
20 For they speak against thee wickedly, and thine enemies take thy name in vain.] 21 Do not I hate them, O Lord, that hate thee? and am not I grieved with those that rise up against thee?
22 I hate them with perfect hatred: I count them mine enemies.
12 Cf. Manuel Joel, Spinoza’s Theologisch-politischer Traktat, auf seine Quellen geprüft (Breslau: Schletter, 1870) 75: “Einen der schönsten Psalmen, eine wahre Zierde des Psalters, Ps. 139, um eines Satzes willen, der das wahrlich nicht beweist, anführen, um daran zu zeigen, dass feindseliger Hass gegen andere Nationen von den Juden für fromm gehalten wurde, ist wahrlich eines Spinoza unwürdig.”
himself did not consider competent in judging them, “because of the utterly adventurous ideas he entertained on Jewish matters.” Chaim Wirszubski (1915–1977) continued this line of thought, remarking that Tacitus is mentioned five times by name in Chapter 17 – not to mention other expressions and theses that appear without acknowledgment, and other chapters. One of these instances can be found in the passage quoted above: their daily worship was “not merely quite different, making them altogether unique and completely distinct from other peoples, but also utterly opposed to others”; the reference being to Histories, 5.4–5. Tacitus’ “excursus” on the Jews, from which Spinoza also takes the thesis that for the Jews “charity and love towards one’s fellow citizen was regarded as a supreme religious duty and was fostered to no small degree by the common hatred they had for other nations, and other nations for them.” But Wirszubski very pertinently reminds us that many of the lessons Spinoza drew from Tacitus were related to history, not to the Jews; that Spinoza’s basic purpose had been to further the freedom of thought (philosophandi libertas) and that “the ideal of freedom of thought is not Biblical, but classical.” This would explain why “the epigrammatic expression of the essence of freedom of thought, which Spinoza uses three times (in the Preface, in the title of Chapter 20 and at the end of that same chapter), was taken verbatim from Tacitus, ‘that in a free commonwealth every man may think as he pleases, and say what he thinks.’”

Spinoza indeed meant to write in Chapter 17 about a specific historical development: this might explain why he did not offer any argument there to justify the far-reaching claim of hatred as a religious duty. This may also account for the fact that many of his readers and commentators look elsewhere in his works for such an argument: for example, the end of Chapter 3, which is devoted to “the vocation of the Hebrews” in general, where Spinoza

13 Cf. Joel, Spinoza’s Theologisch-politischer Traktat, 9; also 42.
15 Tacitus, Histories, 5.4: “Moyses, wishing to secure for the future his authority over the nation, gave them a novel form of worship, opposed to all that is practised by other men. Things sacred with us, with them have no sanctity, while they allow what with us is forbidden.”
18 Tacitus, Histories, 1.1.4. Wirszubski refers to the Preface (Spinoza, Works, 393), and Chapter 20 (Spinoza, Works, 566 and 572).
writes that the Hebrews had “separated themselves from other nations to such a degree as to incur the hatred of all”\textsuperscript{19}; this implies that if the Jews, or the Hebrews, did not “separate” themselves from the other nations – at least not “to such a degree” – there would be no hatred. The contemporary American historian Y. H. Yerushalmi continues this argument: he points out that when Spinoza wrote Chapter 3, he was thinking about the history of the Jews as a whole, not only about the times of prophecy, as in Chapter 17, and the question he had raised bore upon the “survival of the Jewish people.”\textsuperscript{20} Whether or not that question had been important to Spinoza (or for that matter to Hermann Cohen, at any rate in his discussion of Spinoza) seems debatable.\textsuperscript{21} But, in any case, why should separation and separating oneself necessarily entail hatred, or be linked to hatred, either on the side of those who separate themselves, or those who are separated from? An argument still seems to be needed, to account for the association of separation and hatred.

Many readers and commentators of Spinoza, particularly the French, have tried to provide such an argument.\textsuperscript{22} Pierre-François Moreau, who also examined Spinoza’s uses of Tacitus in the TTP,\textsuperscript{23} pointed out with much insight that one central part of Spinoza’s project there was to transform some of the theses Tacitus had originally put forward specifically about the Jews into universally valid statements that pertain to any and every human being. According to this view, Spinoza would have been on his way towards

\textsuperscript{19} Spinoza, \textit{Works}, 425.
\textsuperscript{21} Like Joel, Cohen quoted the passage, without, however, adding any comment; which is one good reason for concluding that the question of the “survival of the Jewish people” had not been central to his reception of Spinoza. Yerushalmi seems to have reached that conclusion in his own paper. On the approach to the key passage in Chapter 3, see the judicious remarks of Warren Zev Harvey in his recent “Spinoza’s Counterfactual Zionism,” \textit{Iyyun} 62 (July 2013) 235–244.
\textsuperscript{22} Besides Gilles Deleuze, whose descriptions of hatred à la Spinoza as a “sad passion” (\textit{passion triste}) have become famous (cf. e. g., his \textit{Spinoza} [Paris: Puf, 1970] 44–45; Engl. \textit{Spinoza, Practical Philosophy}, trans. Robert Hurley [San Francisco: City Lights Books, 1988, 50]), one may consider Alexandre Matheron, who put much weight upon a possible link between hatred and “separation”; he even tried to go back to the Zohar and Isaac Luria’s “breaking of the vessels” (\textit{sh’virat ha-kelim}), in order to account for that link; cf. A. Matheron, \textit{Individu et communauté chez Spinoza} (Paris: Éditions de Minuit, 1988) 30.
constructing an anthropology. Following that lead, many French Spinoza scholars have been looking for a Spinozist anthropology – of love, and also of hatred: in the Short Treatise, where Spinoza had already been very explicit on hatred and its distinction from other related notions such as aversion, as well as on the consequences of hatred;\textsuperscript{24} also, mainly, in the third part of the Ethics, where Spinoza defined love and hatred, writing that love is “pleasure accompanied by the idea of an external cause,” while hatred is “pain accompanied by the idea of an external cause”;\textsuperscript{25} and then in the TTP, in which Spinoza had said that we ought to use our reason to know these causes, and thereby dispel the affections which accompany them.\textsuperscript{26} But the core concern for us remains the TTP.

2. Cohen on Spinoza

Hermann Cohen never missed any opportunity to evoke the “great [yet] frightening thought” (den schaurig-grossen Gedanken) that had been Spinoza’s: to consider the investigation of “human actions and appetites just as if it were an investigation into lines, planes, or bodies.”\textsuperscript{27} The sentence appears in Cohen’s early article on Heinrich Heine, published in 1867. It is the only quotation of Spinoza himself that one finds there, and one wonders if Cohen had already read Spinoza at the time, and if so, what exactly he had read – whether or not he had looked into the Theological-Political Treatise, for example. There are many reasons to think that he had not yet seriously examined it. Cohen did “take Spinoza seriously” (Franz Rosenzweig was right to say so\textsuperscript{28}), but he must have read and studied the TTP quite late in his career: most probably only after 1908, with the publication by Carl Gebhardt of a brand new German edition of the text, accompanied by a long introduction and many annotations.\textsuperscript{29} It was most probably the publication

\textsuperscript{24} Spinoza, Works, 70 f.
\textsuperscript{25} Prop. XIII, Scholium: Spinoza, Works, 286.
\textsuperscript{26} Spinoza, Works, 681.
\textsuperscript{27} Spinoza, Works, 278.
\textsuperscript{29} Spinoza, Theologisch-politischer Traktat, ed. Carl Gebhardt (Leipzig: Dürr, 1908). Cohen explicitly refers to Gebhardt’s edition at the start of his 1915 article, then all along; see Werke, 16.320 and the article itself.
of this edition that induced him to delve deeply into the study of the TTP.\footnote{Soon after the text was published, he presented a long lecture on “Spinoza’s Relationship to Judaism” (Werke, 15.347–388); this was in 1910. The violent diatribes against Spinoza appear even later: in 1915, in the midst of World War 1. In “Hermann Cohen’s Perceptions of Spinoza: A Reappraisal,” AJR Review, 4 (1979) 111–124, Franz Nauen very accurately pointed out that “both of Spinoza’s political writings are mentioned by name for the first time in KBE [Kants Begründung der Ethik], B [1910], p. 387” and that Cohen must have been “prompted both by the specific subject matter of the ‘fourth part’ of Kants Begründung der Ethik and by the appearance of a new German translation of the Tractatus theologicus politicus in the prestigious Philosophische Bibliothek” (122).} Before 1908, Cohen’s knowledge of Spinoza’s TTP may have remained largely based on secondary literature. Still, he seems to have been critical of Spinoza’s so-called “naturalism” very early on. But why? Why did he reject Spinoza’s account of love and also, together with it, Spinoza’s account of hatred?

Many of the answers given to these questions turn on the notion of “pantheism.” One of the most famous responses comes from Franz Rosenzweig, who had availed himself of several resounding formulas coined by Cohen – on the “pedantic leveling of pantheism” (pedantische Gleichmacherei des Pantheismus), for example\footnote{Cf. Rosenzweig, Gesammelte Schriften, 3.166.} – to claim that pantheism would not be “Jewish.”\footnote{Rosenzweig, Gesammelte Schriften, 3.215 f.} This line of interpretation is well-known and also widely accepted, but problematic in many respects\footnote{Cf. M. Bienenstock, “Hermann Cohen sur le panthéisme: Sens et usages du terme dans sa réception de Spinoza,” in Hermann Cohen: L’idéalisme critique aux prises avec le matérialisme, ed. M. Bienenstock (Paris: PUF, 2011) 29–45.} – the first one being that Cohen himself had explicitly said the contrary, not just in one of his earliest articles, but also much later on; one finds echoes of his earlier, positive appreciation even in the 1915 article. Another, much more important reason for refusing to single out the keyword “pantheism” in trying to understand Cohen’s struggle with Spinoza is that the term has regularly been, from the 18th–19th century onwards, a Kampfbegriff: a polemical concept used in different philosophical and political quarrels. Since the object of these quarrels and the contexts have significantly changed over the years, the term pantheism has also gained very different meanings, in different contexts and at different times. When Cohen wrote his early article on Heine, he had assimilated pantheism to the “glorification” or “apotheosis of the human being” (die Verherrlichung des Menschen), as well as the “mission
to work for humanity,” and he was full of praise for Spinoza. But then the term became associated with a “philosophy of identity,” one in which right (Recht) was squarely identified with might (Macht, understood as “force”). Pantheism became, in Cohen’s eyes, a threat to ethics, also for politics: a threat he associated not just with Wilhelm Dilthey, a historian of ideas and one of the most powerful philosophers of his time in Germany, but also, mainly, with other powerful personalities of the time, amongst them historians and political leaders – first and foremost, Heinrich von Treitschke, who was quite close to Dilthey and with whom Cohen conducted for many long years a very bitter argument on Judaism.

Quite soon after having published his piece on Heine, Cohen had also turned to Kant and begun using Kantian terms to discuss ethics, thereby adopting the fundamental distinction between Sein (is) and Sollen (ought). This induced him to retain Kant’s opposition to Spinoza – and to pantheism. He criticized the “flattening” of the moral perspective which, starting with Spinoza, consisted of relating to human actions and aspirations as if they were geometrical lines; he argued that when one adopts such a perspective, one may achieve a lot, but certainly not ethics:

About the circle, Kant says that I have no right to ask what it should be, only to ask which law it follows. Concerning man, anthropology has to inquire into what he is. But ethics needs to know what man ought to do, what ought to be amongst human beings, for human beings, on behalf of human beings! Without acknowledging this Ought, without turning the Ought into the problem, one cannot have any ethics. We do accept that thesis [of Kant’s] … So we ask [for] another connection than that of geometrical lines, surfaces, and bodies. 37

This argument undoubtedly played an important role in Cohen’s increasing opposition to Spinoza, and more particularly to Spinoza’s pantheism,

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34 See Werke, 12.193–208, 218, also 227. The early article was devoted to Heine, who had spent half his life in France, a country in which the meaning ascribed by Heine and then by Cohen to the term “pantheism” (a “mission to work for humanity” which would consist of working for the “divine rights of man”) has long been popular. On Heine in Paris, cf. Heine à Paris: Témoin et critique de la vie culturelle française, ed. Marie-Ange Maillot and Norbert Waszek (Paris; Éditions de l’éclat, 2014). Cohen himself stuck to the socialist idea throughout his life; see H. Holzhey, ed., Ethischer Sozialismus: Zur politischen Philosophie des Neukantianismus (Frankfurt: Suhrkamp, 1994) and more particularly, in that volume, Ernst Erdös, “Die Tradition Spinozas in der sozialistischen Bewegung bis 1927,” 316–349.
35 On this philosophy, see, e. g., Werke, 5.37 f.
37 Kant’s Begründung der Ethik, 3rd ed.; Werke, 2.162. Also Ethik des reinen Willens, Werke, 7.431.
envisaged here as a “naturalism”: it is ethics, or rather a certain idea of ethics, that Cohen defends here against Spinoza, whom he also regularly criticizes for having adopted the title “ethics” for his main work. But it is not certain that this argument is sufficient to fully explain the strength of Cohen’s opposition in his later years.

Focusing upon Cohen’s treatment of love, and also (mainly) of hatred, may turn out to be more revealing. One of the main references in this matter is the 1900 article entitled “Love and Justice in the Concepts of God and Man,” which contains Cohen’s first explicit discussion of the notion of hatred. And it is interesting to note that Spinoza is mentioned in that paper – approvingly: Cohen underlines that the “principle of reward and punishment” acknowledged by Spinoza in the very last proposition of his Ethics (i.e., that the “reward of virtue” is “virtue itself”) is the same as the one we find in the Mishnah, “the reward of a mitzvah is a mitzvah.”

Cohen may also have been thinking about Spinoza when he wrote other parts of this article: for example, those that deal with pantheism, a term about which he says that it has “the strict concept of unity in its blood” (probably meaning that pantheism stands higher than polytheism in the history of religion, and might even be on the way towards monotheism). But he does not explicitly evoke Spinoza in that context.

Nor does he mention Spinoza when he writes on hatred. Cohen’s decision to ground this latter notion upon the talmudic sinat hinam (“groundless hatred”) rather than directly upon the Bible (even the Psalms, which were one of his favorite references) is highly significant. More than ten years before, he had already made a point of publicly explaining that it was not simply the biblical text but primarily the Talmud that had been authoritative for all practicing Jews, from its inception and up to our days;

38 E.g., Werke, 7.15.
40 Spinoza, Works, 382.
41 In the article “Liebe und Gerechtigkeit,” the last section, which deals with “retaliation” (Die Vergeltung) (Jüdische Schriften 3, 84–97) 85, and cp. with Avot 4:2: “the reward of virtue is virtue itself.” Cohen also mentions Spinoza on “the attribute of love,” when he says of Joseph Albo that he was “the pupil of Chasdai Crescas, whom Spinoza quoted several times” (Jüdische Schriften, 3.48); he may well also have had in mind here Manuel Joel’s book, Don Chasdai Crescas’ Religionsphilosophische Lehren in Ihrem Geschichtlichen Einflusse Dargestell (Breslau: Skutsch, 1866; repr. in Beiträge zur Geschichte der Philosophie, Bd. 2, Breslau, 1876). Spinoza translated this passage of the Mishnah literally (praemium virtutis virtus) without mentioning the source.
42 Jüdische Schriften, 3.46.
and he had spared no effort in demonstrating that the set of laws and prescriptions contained in that codex already entailed a universalistic reading of the basic command to love an Other – understood as a human being, not just as a Jew.43 Cohen’s 1900 article on “Love and Justice” (Liebe und Gerechtigkeit) restates the same argument, while developing some of its implications, more particularly for the notion of hatred, which is examined in the fourth section, “Love of the Enemy” (Feindesliebe).44 The title of this section already indicates that Cohen’s intention was a polemical one: he wanted to convince his contemporaries, amongst them the Christians, that the injunction of the Sermon on the Mount, “You have heard that it was said, ‘Love thy neighbor and hate thine enemy,’ But I tell you, love your enemies, and pray for those who persecute you” (Matt 5: 43–44), could not have been directed against the so-called Old Testament, claiming that it nowhere recommends hating one’s enemy. He does admit that the Oral Law, which now exists in writing in the Talmud, contains individual statements of hostility to one’s enemies, but he explains that this could be expected in such a genre of literature, which functioned throughout the centuries as a kind of open floor for expressing many different opinions; and he insists that what counts is “the value of the decisions in which right and law are given their final formulation,” thereby underlining the term “decision” (Entscheidungen), in the juridical sense of piskei din, or piskei halakha, as used in the talmudic tradition. There is no “ruling of law” of the Talmud that would order one to hate one’s enemy.

This is the background to Cohen’s claim that the Talmud is unambiguous on hatred, and that talmudic writings actually “deepened” the notion of “love of the enemy” by suggesting the concept of grundloser Hass (groundless hatred), which “made the psychological elimination of enmity possible.”45 He quotes two sentences of the Babylonian Talmud:

44 Jüdische Schriften, 3.65–75.
45 Cf. Cohen, Jüdische Schriften, 3.72–73: “Der Talmud hat nun aber vielmehr die Feindesliebe durch einen Begriff vertieft, welcher die psychologische Beseitigung der Feindschaft zu ermöglichen geeignet ist. Es ist das der Begriff des ‘grundlosen Hasses’. The expression also appears on one page of the Ethik des reinen Willens, (Ethics of Pure Will) (1904, 2nd ed. 1907; Werke, 7.547–548), and in a 1914 article on the “Aesthetic Value of Our Religious Culture,” in which Cohen briefly evokes it, but only in passing (Werke, 16.228–229).
But why was the second Temple destroyed, seeing that in its time they were occupying themselves with Torah, [observance of] precepts, and the practice of charity? Because therein prevailed hatred without cause. That teaches you that groundless hatred is considered as of equal gravity with the three sins of idolatry, immorality, and bloodshed together.\textsuperscript{46}

Cohen argues that since these three commands are the most important of the so-called Noahide Laws, which embody natural precepts of right and are universally valid,\textsuperscript{47} the forbidding of “groundless hatred” ought also be considered universally valid, and the basis of the other commands: it is nothing less than the “negative expression” of the basic, positive command to love one’s neighbor.

Cohen explicitly rejects the argumentation that could be said to follow from the very formulation of the term “groundless hatred”: that hatred is forbidden when it is “groundless,” but permitted when it is grounded – and perhaps even commanded, if it has justified grounds (one primary example being the hatred of idolaters, who themselves hate God). But Cohen contends that the matter is not to dispute or limit hatred, or to find a reason for hatred where we had not seen any, or to distinguish between reasons for hatred that are justified and other reasons that are not. It is hatred itself that is declared \textit{grundlos} – without a reason or foundation – by the Talmud; and for Cohen, the Talmud is right on this, as “it is a psychological problem [to determine] if hatred as such is a psychological fact in the human mind, or rather covered and disguised by other aberrations.” It is not proven that there is “a primitive emotion (\textit{Affekt}) of hatred … an orientation of spirit which is proper and stands for itself, independently of other affects.” Hatred is “unfounded (devoid of any ground) in the human mind […] There is no ground for hatred. That which appears as a ground is an error and an aberration. Man is here to love.”\textsuperscript{48}

Returning to the polemics of the Sermon on the Mount on loving an enemy, Cohen also contends that this ideal is a “circumlocution” (\textit{Umschreibung}) of the fundamental rabbinical idea of groundless hatred, and that it is similar in that sense to many other prayers of Jesus that take over formulations of the Psalms and belong to either the Written or the Oral Law. He even adds that the ideal picture of Jesus that was presented to later


\textsuperscript{47} \textit{Cf. Jüdische Schriften}, 3.59: where Cohen refers the reader to his analysis in his earlier article “Die Nächstenliebe im Talmud.”

\textsuperscript{48} \textit{Jüdische Schriften}, 3.73 f.
generations seems to bear Stoic features, amongst them the famous freedom of “affects” (Affekte), whether of hatred or of love, sought by the Stoics.  

Cohen does not mention Spinoza in that context. At this time, he seems to have considered Spinoza primarily as a Jewish thinker: in the article entitled “Autonomy and Freedom” (1900), he praises the “harmony” (Einklang) between the “ethical mind” and “the religion and philosophy of Judaism” displayed in Spinoza’s doctrine of affects: the “strength” of that theory would lie in its affirmation that the “knowledge of the Good” is that of an “affect, in which the best part of the will is rescued”; for it is the “power of the affect” that makes freedom possible. Spinoza, who had been part of the traditional Jewish community of Amsterdam, would have known that well, as he would have recited daily every morning the prayer beginning “My God, the soul that you have given me is a pure one.”  

Cohen was to comment upon that prayer in several later texts, amongst them the posthumously published Religion of Reason out of the Sources of Judaism, but in those later texts he no longer praises Spinoza, certainly not for having interiorized the principle in his philosophy. Whenever Cohen mentions Spinoza after 1910, it is to sharply criticize him: for example in Religion of Reason, where he squarely places Spinoza within the tradition of stoicism, and scolds him for having affirmed that “pity” (Mitleid) stems from the same source as “envy” (Neid); he adds that “this one sentence passes judgment on the validity of his view, and at the same time illuminates the ground of it.” These words are very sharp. But although they certainly explain to some extent Cohen’s reticence about Spinoza, they do not seem sufficient to account for the wrath he expressed towards the philosopher in later years.

When one comes to accounting for the reversal of his position, the admiration Cohen seems to have felt for many years towards the philosopher

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49 Jüdische Schriften, 3.74 f.
50 Jüdische Schriften, 3.39.
52 Religion of Reason, 140; Religion der Vernunft, 162. In his 1900 article on “Love and Justice,” Cohen derived “love” itself from “compassion” or “pity” (Heb. rahamim); Jüdische Schriften, 3.50.
53 The observation, already made by Rosenzweig (Gesammelte Schriften, 3.216), was then taken over by, e.g., Karl Löwith in Philosophie der Vernunft und Religion der Offenbarung in H. Cohens Religionsphilosophie (Heidelberg: Carl Winter, 1968) 26.
should also be kept in mind, as well as the closeness of his reading of *sinat hinam* to Spinoza’s own philosophical treatment of hatred.\(^{54}\)

3. Cohen’s change of heart

“Spinoza did not write all his books *sub quadam specie aeternitatis*. To understand his words, one must know for whom, and against whom, he wrote”\(^{55}\): this sound methodological advice offered by Gebhardt in the introduction to his path-breaking edition of the TTP seems to have been greatly appreciated by Hermann Cohen.\(^{56}\) It should undoubtedly be used not only in reading and understanding the TTP, but also in understanding Cohen’s changing position on Spinoza, and his wrath against the philosopher in his later years, which ought also be related (perhaps even primarily) to the conditions in which Cohen lived and wrote, the enemies he was confronted with and also the people he wanted to convince.

When, at the end of his 1915 article, “Spinoza on State and Religion,” Cohen alludes to the “pithy sayings” of Spinoza that would reappear in current newspapers, he himself points to the role played by the conditions of the time in his reading of Spinoza. He does not say that Spinoza was explicitly named, and he does not name the newspapers in question – but why should he? He certainly did not want to give even more publicity to journals that were already much too widespread\(^{57}\) – *Hammer*, for example: a journal founded by Theodor Fritsch in Leipzig in 1901, which contained attacks on

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\(^{55}\) Theologisch-politischer Traktat, ed. Gebhardt, 12.


the “God of the Old Testament” so violent that they even made it to court in Leipzig in 1910/1911, and then again in 1912/1913. The accusation was slander. This had led the court to discuss the question of determining if the journal’s reference to the “exclusive tribal God of the Jews” (der ausschließliche Stammesgott der Juden), a God full of hatred towards all human beings except the Jews, only meant the God of Ancient Israel (that is, long past in history) or also the God in whom contemporary German Jews still believed. Those acting in defense of Fritsch, the anti-Semite, argued that their accusation only applied to former times, not to their contemporaries. Their claim was rejected in court in 1911, but the second judgment turned out to be much less univocal: it exonerated neither the God of the Old Testament, nor the God of contemporary orthodox German Jews.58

Cohen, who had been involved in the public debate of those years, was personally taken to task by Rudolf Kittel (1853–1929), the Old Testament scholar through whom the court formed its judgment in 1913.59 The target of Kittel’s attacks was one central tenet of Cohen’s teaching: his universalistic reading of the Old Testament commandment to love one’s neighbor, which was regularly depicted as a particularistic, “communitaristic” commandment that also involved the commandment to hate one’s enemy, as stipulated in Matt 5: 43 (“You have heard that it was said, ‘Love thy neighbor and hate thine enemy’”). Spinoza had famously endorsed such a reading in TTP Chapter 19: a point that Cohen bitterly bewailed.60 Cohen was very much aware of the passages on hatred in the TTP, which he explicitly mentions in the two works he specifically devoted to Spinoza. In his 1910 lecture on “Spinoza’s Relationship to Judaism,” he curtly points out that there, too, “the hatefulness narrowed the scientific outlook,” and then, referring to Spinoza’s source, Psalm 139, he calls on Maimonides for help: the “enemies

58 See Wiese, “Jahwe,” 37, and Wissenschaft des Judentums, 211.
60 Cf. Karl Otto Erdmann, “Nosismus: Ein terminologischer Vorschlag,” in Der Zeitgeist: Beilage zum Berliner Tageblatt vom 22. 12. 1913, No. 58; and Cohen’s reaction in the same journal less than two weeks later with his article “Der Nächste: Bibellexegese und Literaturgeschichte” (Abendausgabe des Berliner Tageblatts, 5. 1. 1914, 1 f., and many other publications, including Werke, 16, 51–75). An English translation of this text, together with others on love of neighbor, by Dana Hollander is forthcoming.
of God” whom one hates would be idolaters. In his 1915 article, Cohen also asks the crucial question about hatred as a religious duty in Spinoza’s Chapter 17, namely “if hatred, which is valued there as a positive factor, is consistent with his Doctrine of affects.” But then he decides not to discuss the point: even if he knew that Spinoza could not be held responsible for the rabble-rousing propaganda of Cohen’s own years, these were no times for dispassionate academic studies. The sayings on hatred in the TTP must have resounded in a particularly threatening way amongst those Christian scholars who had been counted amongst Cohen’s privileged interlocutors and whom he so wanted to convince: he evokes them in the same paragraph in which he deplores Spinoza’s “pithy sayings.”

It is in the last chapter of Religion of Reason that one finds Cohen’s most explicit discussion of hatred. Although Spinoza’s views – on compassion and also on love – are abundantly discussed throughout the work, he is nowhere explicitly mentioned. Cohen’s discussion with Spinoza remains indirect: for example, in the passage devoted to the Christian prescription to love one’s enemy, Cohen (who repeats that one does not find the exhortation to hate your enemy in the Hebrew Bible) insists that these old texts already contain the prohibition of enmity, hatred for men or misanthropy (Menschenhass).

It is at that point that he presents the progress accomplished by the Talmud, over and beyond the Bible, through the introduction of the concept of groundless hatred:

The Talmud has discovered the concept of “wanton hatred” (שנאת חנם) and introduced it into the prayers. Not only should hatred not have a false cause, but it has no cause at all. Any cause for hatred is empty and vain. Hatred is always wanton hatred. This is the deep wisdom which excels all love of the enemy and which first secures and psychologically strengthens human love. It is not enough that I recognize that I ought to love my enemy – apart from the fundamental question of whether both concepts are compatible. I can remove hatred from the human heart only insofar as I do not know any enemy at all; the information and the knowledge that a man is my enemy, that he hates me, must be as incomprehensible to me as that I myself could hate a man, and therefore it must drop out of my consciousness. The one must become as unintelligible to me as the other. People persuade themselves that they

62 Werke, 15.374–376. The 1910 lecture “Spinoza’s Verhältnis zum Judentum” (Spinoza’s Relationship to Judaism) was unpublished at the time, but later published by Rosenzweig; see Werke, 15.347–413.
63 Cohen, Werke, 16, 406; see also 419f.
65 Religion der Vernunft, 522 f.; Religion of Reason, 452 f.
hate one another, but this is their delusion, the fateful outcome of their ignorance about their own soul and their consciousness. The vanity which Kohelet ascribes to everything is in this case related to hatred, and this vanity is expressed by a word which means futile, and that which is in vain. All hatred is in vain. I deny hatred to the human heart. Therefore I deny that I have an enemy, that a man could hate me. I deny this with the same clarity of my consciousness with which I deny that I have an enemy, that I could hate a man. What is hatred? I deny its possibility. The word, which intends to describe such a concept, is altogether empty.66

As Cohen’s opus postumum as a whole was devoted to studying the “sources of Judaism” in the elaboration of a “religion of reason,” he regularly chose Jewish texts (including Hebrew Bible, the Talmud and quite often Jewish prayers) as a point of departure. This should not be taken to mean that his analysis only applies to Jews or to those, Jewish or Christian, who accept the Hebrew Bible as a source. Quite the contrary: the religion Cohen intended to elaborate from the sources of Judaism was a religion of reason that ought to be valid for all human beings. The conception of love, and also of hatred and groundless hatred, which he sketches in the last chapter, is meant to apply to all human beings. This is the universalistic sense in which he interprets the command to “love your neighbor as yourself,” whose source is the Hebrew Bible. He infers from this that its opposite, sinat hinam, also concerns all human beings; he certainly does not intend his analysis of hatred to apply only to Jews. He does not mention the radically different reading many tended to make of the talmudic condemnation of sinat hinam, according to which civil strife, or civil war amongst the Jews, was to be condemned because it might lead to loss of national independence. But there is no doubt that he strongly disagreed with it, not just because of his own universalistic orientation, but also – and this is the foremost reason – because he himself never considered political life as supreme; he always placed moral and religious obligations above political life.

It is true that he attached much importance to political life (that is, life in a state, whatever the state). When one reads the last chapter of Religion of Reason, which is entitled “Peace,” it is difficult not to hear the foremost political meaning it must have had for him: the war against France was raging in Germany, and when Cohen writes that “Peoples do not hate one another” and that hatred among peoples is a “phantom” in which only “a

66 Religion of Reason, 452; Religion der Vernunft, 522. The Hebrew words appear here, and Cohen retains his earlier rendering in German as grundloser Hass. He had explained earlier in the same work that the Hebrew word hinam generally means umsonst, i.e., eitel (vain) or nichtig (nil): cf. Religion der Vernunft, 267; Religion of Reason, 229. The English translation “wanton hatred” thus is correct.
false national psychology” can induce us to believe, he is talking about the hatred of the French for the Germans, and also that of the Germans for the French, which he deems illusory. “Humans,” he wrote, “persuade themselves that they hate one another, but this is their delusion, the fateful ignorance about their own soul and their consciousness."67 It is also nationalism – French and German, as well as many others one could easily think of – that he castigates.

However, even if his condemnation of hatred as “groundless” owes much of its strength to his condemnation of the nationalistic forms of hatred he witnessed in his own times, it would certainly be erroneous to reduce it to that specific context. It is the more basic question about the very nature of hatred that he wants to ask. And the lines on hatred in the last chapter of Religion of Reason are astonishing: how could Hermann Cohen reasonably deny the reality of hatred as a human passion?

When one looks closer at his writings, one discovers that he did not. He rather went very far in acknowledging its reality and its strength. His experience of hatred seems to have been so strong that he referred all the other passions to it – but deemed it a “mystery of the soul”:

The passions have their common foundation in that mystery of the soul which is constituted by hatred. Neither psychology nor ethics has determined whether hatred is an original direction of consciousness, or merely a transformation of some other instinctual force. It is above all a question of whether hatred does not rather belong to the pathological sphere, and, growing out of it, masquerades as a kind of psychological normality. As pain and pleasure have grown into one another, so could love and hatred be alternating links of the same intellectual force.68

In that last chapter of his last work, which may also count as his last word, Cohen seems to have had very few answers, mainly questions: about the inadequacy of all the attempts at reducing hatred to another passion (envy, for example);69 also about the pathological rather than “normal” nature of hatred, to be cleared up by psychology rather than by ethics. But he offered a thesis to answer these questions: rather than turning to psychology or anthropology, or for that matter to ethics in order to combat hatred, one ought to turn to religion, which does not require hatred, but is grounded upon its contrary, viz., love – “love of one’s neighbor.”

67 Religion of Reason, 452; Religion der Vernunft, 522.
68 Religion of Reason, 451; Religion der Vernunft, 521.
69 See also Religion der Vernunft, 523; Religion of Reason, 453.